

BOOKS FOR THE YOUNG ADULT: A NEED

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In the current scene of writing, a topical awareness is stirring up the minds of writers and publishing houses about the existence of a distinct category of individuals known as the young adult. We know that the new-born develops into the child. But how many of us realize that the child does not straightaway stride into adulthood, but that there is a transition stage where we could categorise the individual as the young adult. He has grown out of childhood mentally, and physically too, but he is not yet a full-fledged adult. I am not herewith elaborating on the psychology of the human mind or the development of man. But the aspect I am trying to analyse is of equal significance, namely, the role of writers in feeding this particular age-group of individuals with the right type of reading material. The writer needs to take just a little extra interest and make an effort to do an in-depth study of the young adult. Amazing facts surfaced. I once noticed that a voracious child reader, as she grew up, suddenly gave up reading at a certain point of time. A frequent visitor to the local libraries, she would at this stage peep into the children's section of the library and turn away with a snigger, scan the book-shelves of the general section with a frown, and finally come home empty-handed. Also, she would go through the books in her home library and pile them up neatly to her right and left, the right pile being children's books and the left general books and fiction read by the adult, and sit in the middle without any book in her hands. What a concrete representation of where she stood! In between, the child and the adult. She had

come out of the exit door of childhood, not to turn back, and she stood at the threshold of adulthood, apprehensive yet curious, annoyed amazed, intrigued yet interested, hesitant yet eager. She is not an individual case, but a representative of a specific age-group, that is, the young adult. A familiar tune rang in my ears:

"I'm too old to be a child

Too young to be an adult."

How I wished I could add,

"But you're just right for..."

and not extend a piece of chocolate but a delicious piece of reading material that this young adult would love to devour!

At this difficult age of growing up, the individual pops up like roasted corn to contradict and oppose whatever is told to him. So, if he is told, "Now here's something specially for you to read," he may turn away from it. Therefore, in practice, the writer has to keep writing for this age-group, the publisher publishing it, and the sales and marketing people make it available in plenty in the book-shelves of book-shops and libraries. The young adult would instinctively lay his hands on them, without being told to do so. I remember to have read about the young adult section of the Boston library where the numerous shelves were stacked not only with books for the young adult, but also with a number of children's books as well as books for adults in order to leave the choice of selecting a book to read, entirely to the youngster on the threshold of adulthood. In several sad cases, the nonavailability of appropriate books makes the young adult turn to trash and 'penny bloods' as they were once called. Imagine the disastrous

results, remembering that what he reads at this stage moulds him for the future.

The writer and the publisher should, first and foremost, be aware about the literary needs of the young adult. It is a specialised art to bring out literature that would satisfy the insatiable curiosity and thirst for new knowledge about the adult world that suddenly looms large in front of this young individual. This conviction would lead to a study of the needs of this target group and develop an intense and sympathetic feeling for it. This is it; to get moving in the groove of producing literature for the young adult.

The young adult faces peculiar problems. Having left childhood behind, he has no intentions of stepping back into it. His child ego is totally suppressed for the time being at least, and he finds the company of children boring. On the other hand, with adulthood glaring at him, he is somewhat frightened. At the same time, he is ready to take up the challenge and stand up to face the adult world boldly. He has begun to learn the facts of life and a strange attraction for the opposite sex tickles him. Such disturbing emotional transformation! More often than not, he clamms up and becomes moody, yearning inwardly for sympathy and understanding. If only there could be books that were just right for him! He would grapple them as his bosom friends.

But what type of books? Books whose characters come alive and enable him to identify himself with them; characters who face the traumatic conditions that he himself faces in real life; youthful and cheerful characters capable of solving his problems in the book, themes that are thought-provoking and helpful in guiding him to step into the adult world; and themes that would temporarily make him forget all woe and care and simply make him laugh out merrily. Humour is as important as

serious emotional reading—humour that is mere fun, as well as subtle and satirical.

Why this sudden concern for the young adult? Were we not young adults once? Who supplied us with special reading material? What trauma did we face? There could be scores of questions like these. The answer is that the world is changing at a tremendous pace today. We cannot deny the fact that childhood is shrinking. Having stumbled out of childhood much before he can face adulthood, the individual of today is caught in this transition period and tossed about in its stormy waves much more than, say, a couple of decades ago. The traumatic feeling of uncertainty is unimaginable. If one has lost childhood, and not gained adulthood, then where does he stand? He faces an identity crisis. Hence the imperative need to feed him with the type of literature that would help him to rediscover himself and gain a sure footing.

It would help the writer tremendously to chat with some young adults and ask them what they read, whether they are satisfied with what they got to read and what they would like to read. In my own small way, I conducted such a survey by distributing questionnaires to a hundred and odd young adults and analysed their answers. It was found in general that the young adults were not satisfied with the reading material that was available to them, Indian books, in particular, whether they were written in English, Hindi or any of the other Indian languages. Classics fascinated them, and also several English and some American books. But Indian books drew a blank. What they wanted was books dealing with their immediate day to day life, not missing out on humour. Some did mention books by Premchand and Tagore, and coming to more recent times, R.K. Narayan and Khushwant Singh. There may be more of such literature in Marathi, Kannada or

Malayalam. But counting a few books or authors on ones fingers is not at all sufficient.

I quote some of the views of the young adults. Priya, aged 14½, writes:

"It would be really nice to read books which are more mature and realistic than children's books. At the same time, I would like them to be racy, and not completely devoid of humour...at the same time there should not be sex and violence as in the adult book; but the suspense should be transparent with predictable solutions as in children's books..."

Fourteen year old Manoj says:

"...we teenagers would like to have a section exclusively to ourselves in libraries containing books to our liking as we have outgrown children's books...I would like authors to write books less immature than children's books and dealing with problems of our age-group..."

Mita who enjoys reading classics says, "I try to read adult books. But many times, they bore me. Because of lack of books for our age-group, we have to read such books. I like abridged versions of the English classics."

Gauri, aged fifteen writes:

"...I would appreciate any effort by writers to write such books for us that are neither too involved, nor too childish...I would sincerely back any attempt to write books exclusively for teenagers..." Amit, too, says that classics are interesting "... but I would like authors to write stories with down-to-earth themes to help today's youth...topics discussing burning problems facing the country..." Siddharth wants to read "subtle humour that is not crude or pretentious, and good educational books that carry authentic information..."

Kartik, also fifteen confesses that sometimes he does not understand half the things in books that he picked up from

the general section of a library. At the same time, he dislikes picking up a book from the children's section..."

Lakshmi, fourteen, wants books to help her face the facts of life, books on history, adventure, humour, nature and environment.

The National Book Trust had conducted a similar survey on a wider basis by announcing an essay competition for the high school level on "Why I read a book and what I like to read." A prize was awarded to the best essay. But I do not know if the entire set of essays submitted were ever analysed, and the results made known to help the writers and publishers of books for young adults.

Recently, the NBT, in collaboration with the Authors Guild of India, conducted a one-day seminar on "Reading material for youth." It was a small gathering that attended the seminar. Nevertheless, the participants sincerely felt that the age-group of 14-18 was a particularly neglected one so far as writing for them was concerned. "No avenues of reading seem to exist for them through the medium of books, be it for entertainment or educational values..." as one paper mentioned, whereas another paper said: "...a little investigation shows we have few books tailored to the needs of this target group to entertain, inform and instruct them about their emerging roles... It is essential to have a carefully designed programme of book production for this segment of readership, books that are imaginative, innovative, informative as well as interesting..."

A new class of writers should emerge to satisfy the needs of this age-group. A study of the sociological and psychological dimensions of the problem concerning lack of reader interest in books would be helpful. Publishers should cooperate to

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create and extend accessibility of books to readers by making them affordable. Society at large, including teachers and parents, should work out innovative methods to bring the readers to the books, remembering that encounters with books can prepare the young adult for encounters with the future. At this stage, books exert a strong influence on the thoughts and ideas, hopes and desires, inclinations and aspirations of the readers of this particular age-group.

The NBT should make available to writers and publishers the results of their survey and the recommendations of the seminar, so that, some beginning can be

made in this direction.

Just a little pause and a little thought directed towards this target group should trigger the mind of the writer. The young adult can stand up to encounter the future far better if he encounters the right type of books, which should come out at the earliest from dynamic authors with initiative and drive, backed by enterprising publishers ready to take the plunge of publishing this contemporary category of books for the young adults. The marketing technique of supply preceding demand should work well. Let the writer and publishing houses together strive to flood the market with reading material for this target group. The young adult is bound to pounce on it, and thus create the demand.